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SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH MAKES THE CASE FOR LONGER US VISA VALIDITY

Classified By: Ambassador Ford Fraker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) During the Ambassador's December 7 meeting with the King, King Abdullah made a specific point of stating his hope that visa reciprocity between Saudi Arabia and the United States soon be increased from two to five years. He reiterated Saudi Arabia's willingness to move forward on this issue. He said that he wanted more young Saudis to be educated in the United States and that they were very eager to go. However, now they are going to "Australia and Japan" because they can not get visas to the United States. "Both our countries are losing." The King said he had raised this problem with the President in the past and planned to do so again during the upcoming visit.

¶2. (C) Comment: Visas remain a very high priority issue for the King. It was the first topic he raised with the Ambassador after having agreed to the upcoming Presidential visit. He is spending tens of millions of dollars sending Saudi students to study abroad. He recognizes that the surest way to modernize the thinking of young Saudis is to get them out of Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, the King is correct that many Saudi students are now choosing to study in countries other than the United States. Canada and Great Britain are other leading destinations. Nevertheless, the United States remains the destination of choice for most young Saudis and the King faces a domestic political issue from students and parents who want him to fix their American visa problems.

¶3. (C) To be perfectly clear, it is the duration of the visa, rather than its initial issuance, that causes most Saudi students a problem. As the visa affects only entry into the United States, a Saudi student with a two year visa can legally remain in the United States for as long as he is enrolled as a student. During his first two years in the United States, he can reenter the country as often as he likes. However, once the two year visa has expired, he can remain legally enrolled as a student, but he can no longer go home for a visit without getting a new visa while back in Saudi Arabia. It can take months to get the new visa. Many students have missed a semester waiting for their return visa. Many others have decided not to come home until their studies are finished. Just yesterday, the local press reported on Saudi students who are choosing to have their weddings in the United States so they do not have to come home and face the need for a new visa. Unfortunately, as the King pointed out, more and more Saudis are simply seeking to avoid the issue by studying in other countries.

¶4. (C) As an indication of the seriousness with which the King takes the visa issue, he has asked Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal to take the lead in expanding visa reciprocity with the United States to five years. A six month pilot program

is now under interagency review. We fully agree that educating the next generation of Saudi leaders in the United States will help modernize the Kingdom and ultimately win the War on Terror. Moreover, we are equally committed to promoting the welfare of American travelers and businessmen who will benefit greatly from less restrictive Saudi visa policies. End comment.

FRAKER